



The Brazilian Jaguar

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My last four books of poems are part of an ambitious project I hope I'm able to complete. It's the project of a lyrical epic, of the liberation of poetic language toward epic horizons. History would serve as a scene through which peoples, civilizations, and cultures could circulate freely. I am on a quest for my identity according to the laws of crossbreeding, of the shock and cohabitation of all identities. I want this hymn to take root in the open space of history. I don't know where this quest will lead me, but I know that its origin is the multiplicity of cultural origins. In such a project, poetry comes up against cultural racism and rejects any culture based on purity of blood. Aren't we the children of a region that from time immemorial has been the theatre of interactions, both positive and negative?

I have found a terra firma saturated with history. I draw my strength from it because I look through the prisms of past and future. Thus the present appears less fragile, more like a passage toward a more certain history. Standing on said earth, when I observe something tragic I also see its temporary aspect, for human beings are finally the product of this tragedy crisscrossed with absurdities.

Rome, despite all its brutal attributes, will not dominate the earth again. I am one of the inhabitants of the suburbs of Rome; it is with irony that I watch the emperor pass by—and continue my story.

(Original translation from Arabic and Hebrew by Elias Sanbar and Simone Bitton; adapted and translated from French by Pierre Joris)

Haroldo de Campos

The Brazilian Jaguar

The couched Brazilian Jaguar

—T. S. Eliot

Brazilian poetry, like some mythological heroes, never had a true infancy (infant, one that cannot speak). It was born already adult, operating (fluently speaking) a universal code: the Baroque, a very sophisticated and elaborate language. Our first great poets were Baroque and multilingual: Gregorio do Mattos Guerra (1636–1696), a virulent satirist nicknamed “The Mouth of Hell,” but also a gifted lyricist, wrote in Portuguese and Spanish, including in some of his poems African and Indian words. Botelho

de Oliveira (1636–1671), a distinguished lyricist, composed poems in Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, and Latin. Not to mention a forerunner, the Jesuit Anchieta (1534–1597), founder of the City of São Paulo, who wrote poems and mystery plays (*autos*) in Portuguese, Spanish, Latin, and Tupi Guarany (he was the author of the first Tupi language grammar). Our literature arose under the sign of polyglotism. Our Arcadian (neoclassic) poets had reacted only moderately to the Baroque code: “cultist” features remain, for instance, in the diction of Claudio Manoel da Costa (1729–1789), one of the best representatives of that period.

In contradistinction to Hispanic American literatures, Brazilian Romanticism produced an extremely singular poet, Joaquim de Sousa Andrade, Sousândrade (1833–1902), author of a long epic as well as dramatic travel poem (the scenery of which is both South and North American, from Patagonia up to Manhattan). His “Wall Street Inferno” (a section of this long poem) was located in the New York Stock Exchange and melded quotations in several languages, using a kind of “montage technique.” In a certain sense, Sousândrade’s poem has anticipated Neruda’s *Canto General* and Pound’s “Financial Hell Cantos.” Our best Symbolists were Cruz e Sousa (1861–1898), the “Black Swan,” an Afro-Brazilian poet, and Pedro Kilkerry (1885–1917), a mulatto from Bahia, descended from Irish stock, who had a remarkable gift for languages and was an admirer of Mallarmé and translator of Corbière.

Brazilian Modernism (Avant-garde) started in 1922, the year of Eliot’s *Waste Land*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Vallejo’s *Trilce*, under the influence of both Italian Futurism and French Cubism. In contradistinction to Spanish-speaking countries, French Surrealism had no significant influence on the Brazilian scene. In contrast, Brazilian Modernism’s “philosopheme” by excellence was the Anthropophagy (Cannibalism) of Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954): a metaphorical proposal for devouring foreign influences and reelaborating them from a Brazilian differential viewpoint.

After this very brief survey, I should like to say a few words on Brazilian “Concrete poetry,” a movement that started in the early fifties. Differently from other foreign “Concrete poets,” the Brazilian poets were much concerned with tradition (a live tradition), being influenced by Pound’s “make it new” conception. Since the very beginning of the movement, Brazilian “concretists” developed a programmatic translation (“transcreation”) activity from several languages into Portuguese, in order to enrich and enlarge our patrimony of forms. A critical and theoretical activity was also intensively promoted, in order to create frames for the apprecia-

tion of new trends, and also in order to rescue from oblivion inventive poets neglected by professional literary historians (as, for instance, Sousândrade and Kilkerry). For these reasons, Brazilian Concretism had a deep influence being a sort of departure point for new developments throughout the next decades.

Since the sixties, I have no longer written “concrete poems” in the strict sense. Avant-garde movements have, in my opinion, an ideological and historical duration or tempo. Avant-garde has to do with Utopia, with programming the future. After the optimistic period of the fifties (under the presidency of liberal-progressive Juscelino Kubitschek, the builder of *Brasília*, our new capital, and the promoter of the distinguished communist architect Niemeyer), we suffered from a more than twenty years long military dictatorship (from the sixties up to the eighties), and the world entered concomitantly into a phase of “ideological crisis.” So, by a natural context-motivated tendency, I have moved from the more limited conception of *stricto sensu* “concretism” to the larger problem of *concretion* (sign materiality) in language, in a Jakobsonian sense. Furthermore, I don’t believe in the end of Modernity and in the emergence of a so-called Postmodernism. I think we are now in a “Postutopian” moment, but still within Modernism (we may be called “Postmodernists” only in the sense we are still developing the possibilities opened by 1897 Mallarmé’s *UN COUP DE DÉS*; or, in other words: Baudelaire was the Modern poet par excellence, as W. Benjamin pointed out; Mallarmé—the late Mallarmé—in regard to Baudelaire, is already the first “Postmodern,” and we are still exploring Mallarmé’s heritage). To be a “Postutopian” poet working on the concrete materiality of language does not mean to have renounced the critical dimension of the poetical task, neither to have forgotten the technical conquests of Modernity. Even committed poems continue to be possible and necessary (as for instance my recent “The Left Angel of History,” protesting against the massacre of the SEM-TERRA/*without-land* in Pará, north of Brazil). No nostalgic, regressive orientation is being aimed at. What is different is that I have substituted the optimistic-futuristic-millenarian project of the fifties with a more realistic and effective one, based on the urgent needs (either aesthetic or ideological) of the present.